

House Education Committee

December 6, 2011

Chairman

I would like to start by thanking you for this opportunity to give testimony to the committee today on the educational issue of Virtual options for students in Senate Bill 619. This is my first time giving testimony before a Legislative committee. I will try my best to be direct and to the point.

I would like to start by recognizing my former teacher, football and wrestling coach, employee and now my representative to the House of Representatives, Tom Hooker. I learned many great things in the classroom and the athletic field from Mr. Hooker and I am proud to be here testifying in his presence and to have him on this committee.

I have been in education now for thirty years. My background is as a teacher for Special needs students, Athletic Administrator, Principal, Curriculum Director and Superintendent. Please know that this thing we call education is my avocation not my vocation. I am here representing all the great people in education who have chosen this avocation. It is our mission to make sure all young people have the opportunities to gain the necessary skills to be productive participants in our communities. I currently serve the community of Hopkins as the Superintendent of Hopkins Public Schools in Allegan County. Representatives Schuitmaker and Genetski represent our students.

I strongly support Virtual options of learning for students. In Hopkins Public schools all of our Middle and High School students are learning in a Blended Learning environment right now. Teachers are providing our students learning opportunities that involve electronic tools on individual Net books which we provide for all of our Middle and High School students. Our community has embraced this opportunity as a way for our students to "Learn Locally and Compete Globally." A large part of our success is the continued focus on the relationship between the student, the content and the teacher. I know that I gained many valuable lessons with teachers and coaches. Those lessons have taught me to set high goals, be passionate and hard work pays off. These lessons must be a part of any Virtual experience and our local schools are great places for this to continue to happen. We have also learned that not all students learn well in electronic formats. Many of our students want and need the interaction with teachers to learn at high levels

All of the school districts in Allegan County share a belief that we need to offer students and families in our communities' virtual options. Those range from totally computer based instruction in and out of our buildings, to all virtual learning both in and out of our buildings, with lots of options in between. We are working collaboratively to create training sessions for instructors in our schools to learn to teach in this format. I met last week with seven teachers in my district that are interested in learning to teach in this environment and working to provide these types of options for students in Hopkins and Allegan county. We are looking to share classes between districts that will increase learning options for students as well.

We have also demonstrated in our county that we can find innovative ways to provide our students with great learning options. We have developed a program with Lake Michigan Community College to provide direct college credit to the students in Allegan County. Hopkins already has seven staff approved as adjunct professors. These instructors provide college level instruction to students in our communities without the need to travel extended time and miles to get this learning option. Programs exist in other schools and also at our Career Technical Center as well to expand the options for students.

I believe that you can help all districts to move more to these virtual options, by supporting efforts by districts to create and provide more options for students in much the same way you did for early college. Many of the superintendents I talk to are working hard to find ways to provide the tools and instruction for students in this different environment. Bringing in for profit Virtual programs, with little or no track record of quality of instruction or demonstrated student achievement success, is not the answer. Accountability measures exist for our current schools. Why not support our efforts to grow these options and maintain the responsibility that we have for providing quality programs to our students and community. Support and require districts to work together to provide these options for students. Some district may want to provide those options through online providers other will want to create their own.

In closing, I would like to thank you for the work you do for the children of Michigan. I empathize with the complexity of your task. We as educator understand complex tasks as we try to ensure that all students in our communities achieve success. Please provide us with the vision you have for how that should be provided, but I implore you to not allow that responsibility to go to, for profit operations from other parts of the country. We can and must "Learn Locally and Compete Globally." I believe we have demonstrated that it can be done in Allegan County and I am sure there are other successful programs throughout the state of Michigan. Please allow us to grow those examples before you bring in other providers. As a legislature you have given districts many tools and expectations to change the way we do business. I know we are all working extremely hard to meet those expectations. Please allow those new options a chance to have an impact before you add additional changes.

Thank you again,

Chris Stephens, Superintendent

Hopkins Public Schools